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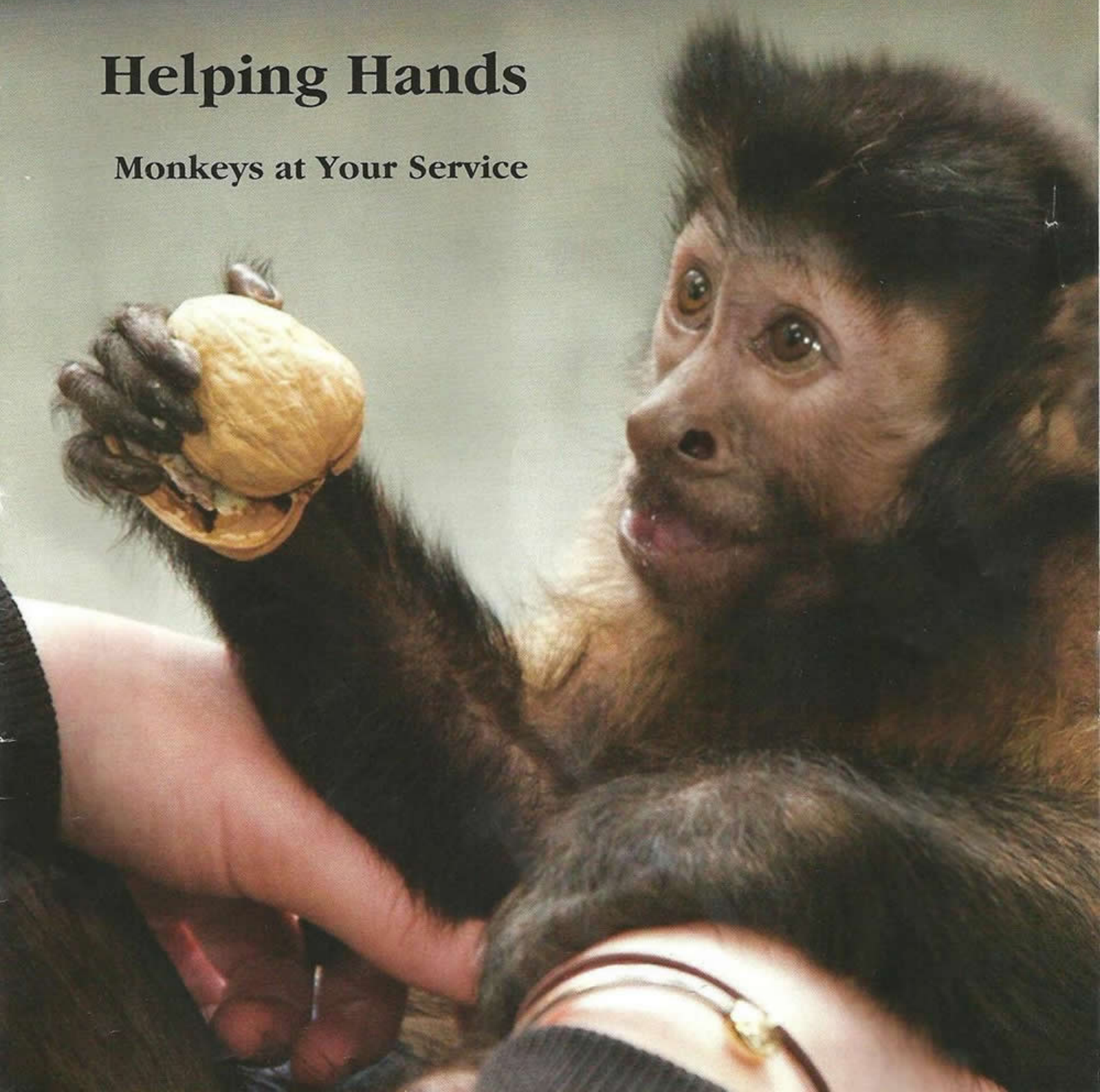
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Getting Dressed: Adaptive Clothes for Kids

With comfort, dignity and style, determined entrepreneurs fill a much-needed niche.

by Wendy Helfenbaum

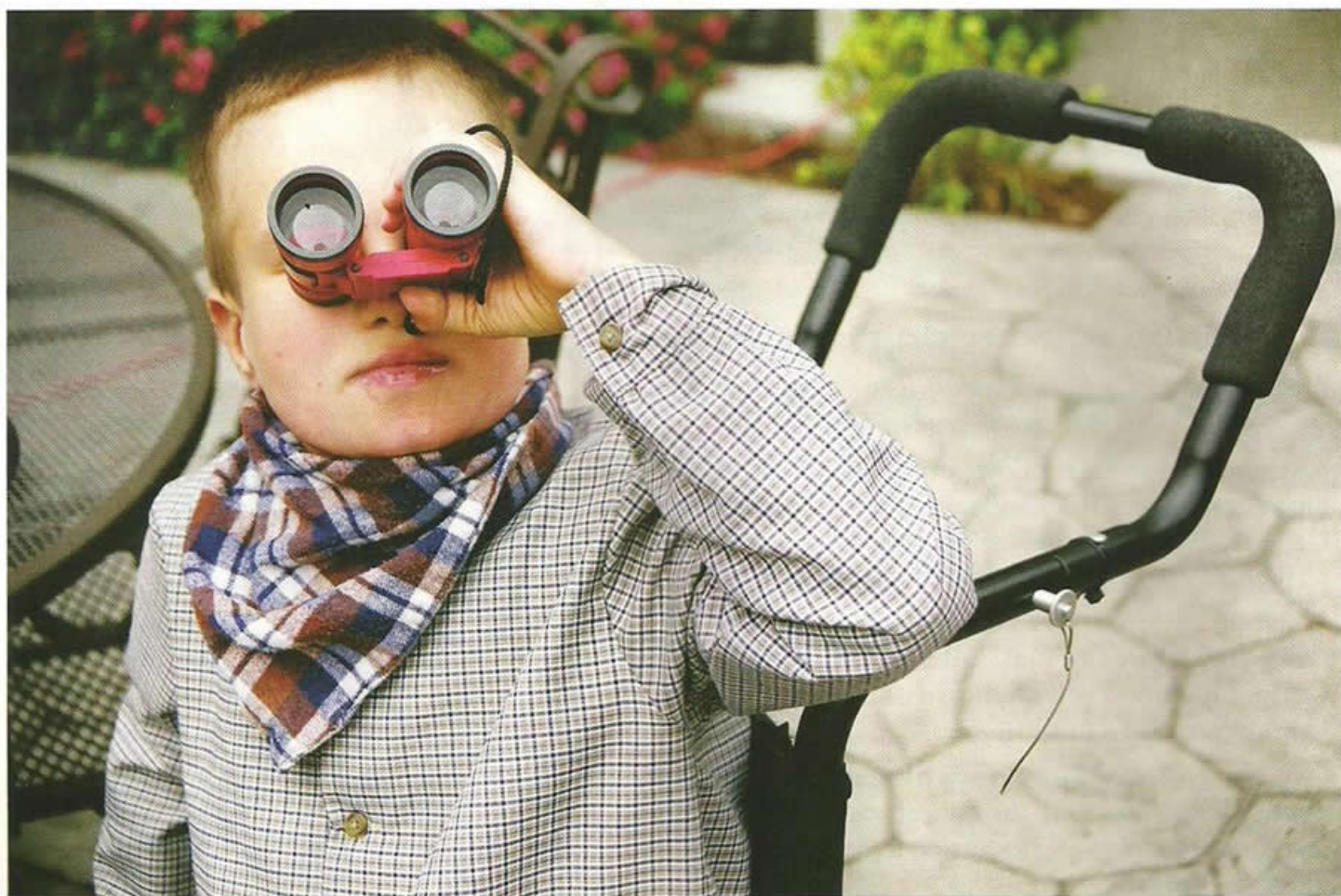
Four little words, one potential headache: adaptive clothing for children. For many parents of growing children with spinal cord injuries or other special needs, shopping for clothing that works is one spree they'd like to avoid. Thankfully, more and more companies are now meeting the demand for fashionable, affordable, cool adaptive clothing.

While working as a pediatric special needs nurse, Victoria Valencia was becoming increasingly frustrated. Many of her young

patients had gastrointestinal feeding tubes (G-tubes), tracheotomies, braces or heplock tubes. Getting dressed was at best, a huge annoyance and at worst, a total nightmare.

"A lot of children want to play with their G-tubes, so I was always trying to find solutions. I'd put clothes on backwards, and usually ended up cutting holes in their clothing, [so parents and caregivers could have access]," says Valencia, who lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

After years spent complaining about the lack of practical, adaptive clothing for children, one of Valencia's friends urged her to do something about it. Although she had no sewing, manufacturing or business experience whatsoever, Valencia took a giant leap of faith. In 2006, she launched Mini-Miracles, an online company specializing in attractive adaptive clothing. "It was a huge learning curve, because I started backwards," says Valencia. "I didn't have any technical textile



Mini-Miracles

experience, but I did have the technical medical experience, and I knew what the clothes needed to look like: I wanted them to be fashionable, so that the children had some dignity.”

Today, Mini-Miracles carries 10 core pieces for children: short- and long-sleeved t-shirts, one-piece bodysuits, pajamas and bandanas, all of which incorporate adaptive features designed specifically to promote self-esteem and independence.

“Everything has G-tube pockets lined with waterproof materials to prevent stains, snaps at the neck for access if they have heplocks or a tracheotomy, and snaps in the front,” explains Valencia. “If the client has a cast, a prosthesis, a brace or a splint, they don’t need to wear big tacky jogging pants, or slit a hole down their jeans. For children with spinal cord injuries or spina bifida, the pants have a longer rise in the back to accommodate comfortable wheelchair sitting, flat seams to reduce friction, a roomy seat to accommodate diapers and zippers on the inside for easy changes.”

Most important to Valencia is that you can’t tell by looking at the clothing that it’s been adapted. “Working with little ones has been such a blessing to me;

I wanted to be able to give some small token back to them, and dignity is a big thing,” she explains. “People should be focusing on their abilities, rather than their disability, and that’s what I wanted the clothing to do.”

Mini-Miracles sells to clients in Norway, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the U.S. Valencia donates 10% of her profits to children’s and special needs charities.

Help is Just Half a World Away

In 2002, Jill Bayley’s son Logan suffered a substantial brain injury during an emergency cesarean section, and became a quadriplegic. The Nampa, Idaho-based mom began having clothing challenges when Logan’s first G-tube was put in place at 10 months old.

“If we dressed him in a snap-bottom top, we couldn’t access his feeding tube without completely undressing him,” explains Bayley. “I had to buy an entirely new wardrobe of tops and bottoms, no cute onesie outfits. With the serious health issues we’d faced, I felt sad that this part of our life was affected as well—dressing our kids sometimes feels like the only ‘normal’ thing left. The last thing I want was for him to be dressed

poorly in cut-up clothing.”

So Bayley became a mother of invention. She designed Tummy Tunnels—vibrant iron-on patches with G-tube access—so that Logan could wear snap-bottom clothing like other babies.

As Logan grew, Bayley scoured online stores for quality, affordable clothing designed for children with special needs. “The selection was slim, mainly consisting of homemade-looking items that were priced out of this world,” she recalls. “The greater challenge as he became older and heavier was pulling and tugging to get clothing on. Sweatpants are fine, but I like to dress him in ‘normal’ jeans and a top. Also, fitting a diaper in clothes made for kids that don’t wear diapers is difficult: to get them wide enough in the rear, they end up being very long in the legs.”

Winter coats added another source of frustration. “By the time I got him ready to go out the door, I’d be sweating so badly, I didn’t need a jacket,” adds Bayley, who finally discovered a United Kingdom-based boutique, Rackety’s, that met all her son’s needs. Fashion designer Annabel McMahon started up the company in her teenage son’s bedroom, and now sells to 22 countries.

“Annabel’s Velcro-back jacket

Get Dressed! Online resources for adaptive clothing

www.minimiracles.ca

www.sweetlemonadedesigns.com

www.racketys.com

www.tummytunnels.com

www.EasyAccessClothing.com